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THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S REFUGEES

Soren JESSEN-PETERSEN, Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees, reviews the state of the world's refugees. There are 22 million refugees and internally displaced persons in 125 countries. There are also 25 million displaced people beyond the reach of UNHCR. Countries are becoming less inclined to receive refugees and UNHCR is not responsible for economic refugees or asylum seekers. The international community is increasingly expecting aid agencies to provide solutions to complex humanitarian problems. Mr. Jessen-Petersen believes that no agency alone can take care of all the refugee problems.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Wars and internal conflicts have driven millions of people from their homes. Today, there are more than 20 million refugees and displaced persons in many parts of the world. A recently published report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or UNHCR states that "unless concerted action is taken, more people will be forced to abandon their homes across the world, but fewer will find safe refuge". What can the international community do to protect refugees and ensure their safe return to their homes?

Our guest today is directly involved in the issues of refugees. He is Soren Jessen-Petersen, Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees. Joining me to talk with Mr. Jessen-Petersen are Thalif Deen of *Inter Press Service* and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. Mr. Jessen-Petersen welcome to **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Assistant High Commissioner, the problem of refugees seems to be getting worse every year and it must be costing your agency enormous amount of money to cope with this terrible problem. How do you go about it? Do you have refugee camps in -- how many countries?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, not refugee camps but we have refugees and UNHCR presence in more than 125 countries, more than 250 offices UNHCR all over the world. Some of these countries there are, I would say, still refugee camps. But that's one of the problems -- is that countries are less and less inclined -- prepared to receive refugees so what you see is emergency outflows and very often what I would call emergency returns.

LITTLEJOHNS: There are those inclined to receive refugees because they feel that they will never get rid of them. Is that the problem?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, I think there are a number in the industrialized world. I think there is a mix. There is a sense that the refugees or asylum seekers are common at the time of -- short of rising unemployment, economic difficulties. There have been very often a total lack of leadership in trying to explain what is happening. Whereas in the developing world, there are some very legitimate issues of financial burdens, but also very legitimate security concerns. So it all adds up to making it more difficult for refugees to find asylum and threatened with forced return.

LITTLEJOHNS: We heard a lot about aid fatigue, that is, governments who are in the best position to provide assistance are becoming increasingly reluctant to do so for many reasons. Are you having a problem raising funds in UNHCR?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: No. So far, we have been, I would say, well-received – well-treated by governments. We have been running with the increase in the numbers of refugees, an annual budget of around one billion dollars over the last five-six years and we have actually been funded....

LITTLEJOHNS: So it's almost as much as the regular budget of the UN?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Yes, it is enormous, but I think we ... there ... we are grateful to donors. They have, by and large, funded our budget. We are seeing some strains this year, but we would be able to fund most of it. So on that side no fatigue. In terms of receiving asylum seekers and refugees, well, there we are, as I say, we begin to see a certain fatigue and that was a great deal.

DEEN: Yes. If I may go back a little into history. During the height of the Cold War, most of the refugees were political refugees. They're probably coming from Eastern Europe or the Soviet - the former Soviet Union. But now, predominantly, the refugees are economic refugees and ... do you ... do you ... does the UNHCR make a distinction between the two?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Yeah. First of all, I would not agree entirely. I would certainly agree that during the Cold War, there were political refugees and I would even add, there was a strategic interest ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Right.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: ... in receiving the refugees and providing asylum. That is no longer the case. I would not agree that today, the majority are economic refugees. However, the chances are that, in addition to the persecuted – those who come because they are persecuted – refugees are now fleeing wars, they are very often fleeing internal wars at this place inside. And a lot of those coming out are coming for economic reasons. There we make the distinction. We are responsible for people who cannot stay at home because they have been persecuted or because of war. Those who come for economic reasons may have good reasons but they are not refugees in our sense. They do not fall on our care.

DEEN: And the asylum countries are also tightening up restrictions, right?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: They are clearly tightening up and one problem is, as you say, that there is a mix of people coming. Some for political reasons, some for economic, and even to determine who is who does require quite an effort and involves a lot of money, by the way, because it has been done case by case. So there is a mix of people coming to, and not the least, the industrialized countries today.

DEEN: Yeah, you're not called upon to make the distinction?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, we have the role, according to the 1951 Convention supervisory. Governments make the distinctions. Governments decide who they want to let

in and who not. But they can seek our advice or we can make our advice available in accordance with our role in the Refugee Convention.

LESSING: You said that you had a budget of about a billion dollars, US dollars, a year. Are countries, ah – western countries, countries which receive refugees – rather happy to see you spending all these money because it saves them from having to address some of the underlying problems as to why there are refugees in the first place. On questions like the alleviation of poverty, stopping conflicts, and so on, is humanitarian aid being used when more rigorous and vigorous political and military aid could be – military intervention – would be more appropriate?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Yeah, I think that's a very good point. That is a point that the book makes, that increasing the – since the end of the cold war – humanitarian action has clearly been used as a substitute for more decisive political action. In some cases, even more decisive military action. Now, we are very worried about that because we make it clear that humanitarian action has some very clear limitations. We can save lives, but we cannot resolve the underlying problems.

LESSING: But you got some suggestions in the book in some of your conclusions ...

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Right – right.

LESSING: ... about, for example, looking at questions of poverty and conflict.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Absolutely.

LESSING: But these are also tied in with other UN agencies, for example, the development programs of course.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Of course. No, what we are saying in the concluding chapter is that these conflicts producing refugees cannot be resolved by humanitarian agencies in actions and we are suggesting an agenda for action reducing poverty, curtailing arms trade, much greater investment on peace building, following peace agreements, and much more aggressive focus on democracy, human rights and, finally, accountability. That is, that both on collective accountability, both individual accountability. And we are following very, very closely the international criminal court on curtailing arms trade. We saw a wonderful example last week with the banning of the anti-personal mines. So, these are not Utopian proposals but they have to come together and yes, the responsibility would lie with somebody else but UNHCR – development organizations, but primarily governments. Winding it all together, if that could be done, then we would be taking a major step forward in solving some of the underlying problems.

LESSING: But you're not particularly kind in your report, certainly in the conclusion, to some of the members of the – permanent members – of the Security Council. You are also suggesting that they are hiding behind humanitarian help.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, we have said it clearly. We said it first in Bosnia. It was obvious that for 3-4 years, the operation in Bosnia was humanitarian. UNPROFOR, authorized by the Security Council, was there ...

LITTLEJOHNS: the Force.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: The United Nations Protection Force was there to support humanitarian action. We were clearly a substitute and on several occasions during the war, we made it clear and we even threatened to withdraw. But they were not prepared to have us withdraw because there was nothing instead. So what we are saying is, there is a limit to how long you can push humanitarian action out in front, because you're also weakening humanitarian action. We end up discredited and fragmented in many ways so that one should also be conscious of The only response that the international community has used since the end of the Cold War has been the humanitarian. It must be about time, we say, to get the political and sometimes security machine moving again.

DEEN: Talking of Utopian proposal, there has been a proposal for UN conference on migration. It has been there for quite some time and the issue of refugees and asylum is also expected to come up at this conference. Do you know what is the status of this proposal?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, I understand that there is a lot of resistance to it. I am not totally up-to-date but as I understand it is not going through. I think whatever initiative be taken, it is extremely important just to look at the overall issue. But on the other hand, make a clear distinction between migration and refugee movements.

DEEN: There's a link between the two.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, there's a link in that nobody leaves their home without a very good reason. But the courses are different and the tools in responding – it must be different. So there's a link, but it is also important to distinguish the two.

DEEN: What about the question of family reunion amongst refugees. Is that a big issue in Europe just now?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Ah, it is an issue in Europe. It is an issue in Rwanda. I mean, many of those who were more or less tracked across the borders are from Rwanda -- between Rwanda and Zaire – in '94. Well unaccompanied children, they're lost to their parents and we have brought a lot of them -- we were working very closely with UNICEF – back to their families. Family reunion in the wider sense is an issue all over the world. But also in Europe, and we are very active on that.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Jessen-Petersen, as you know, Representative Christopher Smith of New Jersey was instrumental in blocking the implementation of the agreement to pay the United States' arrears to the United Nations considerable sum of a billion dollars owed but the agreement was calling for something over 800 million to be paid. And it was blocked

because of his argument that abortions were permitted by the United Nations in refugee camps has became a major issue. What's your response to that?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well we have. We have discussed this issue directly with Mr. Smith on several occasions. I have personally done it on at least one occasion. Our response is that we are engaged in dealing with the undesired effects of a lot of sexual violence in the camps. Refugee women are being raped. It is being used as a political weapon and clearly that leads to effects that are totally undesirable. We make reproductive health available to those who come forward and voluntarily, I would say, seek our support. Doing nothing less would be absolutely irresponsible in our view so we are not involved in abortion as such but we are clearly involved in dealing with a very serious phenomenon of the effects of sexual violence in refugee camps.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you actually discourage these women from seeking abortions as a quote solution unquote?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, I mean, we have counsellors and Non-Government Organizations have counsellors and we provide counsel. But in case where, for instance, a woman has been raped and do not want to follow through, we say that this is what we have available and it is evidently up to the individual to decide whether to use it just as it is up to any organization working with us to decide whether they want to be part of it.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you have an estimate of the number of abortions that have been performed?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Oh, I have no idea whatsoever. I mean, we are talking about huge refugee camps. Hundreds of thousands of people. What we do know ...

LITTLEJOHNS: So hundreds of thousands of abortions?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: No, no, no, no. That's what I am not saying. I am saying we are talking about huge refugee camps and what happens, I mean, a lot of it is out of sight. What we are trying to do is to get it within sight. Because what happens out of view out of sight are – is very often – the most dangerous to the individual woman.

LESSING: You mentioned there are occasions when the UNHCR is discredited because it is, in a sense, being asked to do more than it's able to do or is being put in a position of being a substitute. What happens, for example, when you – when you're stuck with a situation, as you were in Eastern Congo, where the refugee population was ordered out by the host government, in this sense, and you have to pick them up and take them away and they accused you of letting militants run the camps, of them being no more than armed camps, where the militants and opponents of a regime could thrive. How do you answer things like that?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, we have a very clear answer on that. Probably because we have been asked the question so many times. These refugees, more than one million people, fled into the camps in Zaire in the summer of '94 July. The first 4-5 weeks, we were exclusively focused on saving lives. But once we were over, say, the initial lifesaving phase, we realized what we have in front of us. And on the 30th of August, from 4-5 weeks after they arrived, the 30th of August '94, Mrs. Ogata, the High Commissioner for Refugees, wrote to Boutros-Ghali, Secretary-General at the time, and said what we have on those camps is a very explosive mix of the former army, militia, probably a lot of those responsible for the genocide, and they are holding women and children hostage. We need, we in UNHCR need, the refugees need, a military operations going and separate the non-refugees from the refugees. The Secretary-General tried for 3-4 months to mount an international military operation, the response was almost nil and in the end, we the humanitarian axis, have to cope with that on our own. This is not a humanitarian responsibility. It's a political responsibility. It is endangering, not only humanitarian staff and the refugees, but our credibility. Because when things then go wrong, we have been blamed for housing armed groups. Although we are on record for warning the world, warning the Security Council, that this would lead to an explosion and threatened regional peace and stability. That is irresponsible.

LITTLEJOHNS: That is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Soren Jessen-Petersen, Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees. Thalif Deen?

DEEN: Yes, since more and more countries are tightening up and closing their borders, does this mean that your work is going to increase over the next few years?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, this is unfortunately one of the conclusions in the state of the world's refugees. We would have liked to conclude by saying we're on the way out of business because UNHCR is a temporary organization renewed five years at a time. What we believe – that we are still not through the most turbulent period of the post Cold War – we believe we still have to get through a couple of very difficult years where, as Mr. Littlejohns said, where people will continue to be driven from their homes and they will find it increasingly difficult to find safety. Since we are responsible for helping them to find safety – since – that they're not being forced back, yes, I'm afraid that will have a lot of work over the next couple of years.

DEEN: And you are just now, the primary UN agency handling refugees. But there are also the UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA – they're also involved. And the Secretary-General says that as part of the restructuring of the UN, he wants to cut down on these and duplication and is there any attempt being made to coordinate all of these under one end?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Oh, yes. One of the Secretary-General's proposals which were, in fact, an action that he will be taking within his own authority, that is to consolidate all these action, all these activities under an emergency relief coordinator who has just been appointed and maybe, almost by coincidence, will come from UNHCR – Under-Secretary-General de Meloo – and the idea is to bring all the organizations together in a coordinated response. We have ...

DEEN: Will you also come under it or the UNICEF?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: No, I mean, come under in that, whenever there is a response, there is a matter of channelling whatever is available into a coordinated response. Well, we certainly want to be part of that because no agency can take care of these massive problems alone. And refugees – yes, we have a central responsibility, but without the strong support of world food program, UNICEF, UNDP to move into rehabilitation, plus numerous NGOs, this is – will be an absolutely impossible job. So we have every interest in talents, resources and capacities being pooled together.

LITTLEJOHNS: Thalif Deen mentioned UNFPA – population fund – are they not involved there?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Oh, yes, yes – I think you referred to it earlier on the issues of reproductive health, these activities are coordinated by UNFPA and UNHCR. We have memoranda of understanding, very close collaboration in many places of the world on, among other things, these issues of reproductive health.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are they providing doctors, or what?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: They are providing basically professional advice. We provide the doctors, but they are professional advice and ...

LITTLEJOHNS: So they have – they have sort of consultative ..

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Yes, yes, yes, yes. And sometimes also staff.

LESSING: In your report, one of the chapters deals with stateless people and, in particular, stateless children. Could you tell us a bit more about the problems because, I suspect, that many of us have never really thought about these problems.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Yeah, ah, this is, in fact, the time, the century, that we see a rise in the problem of statelessness and obviously, it always happens after sort of a cataclysmic event – World War I, World War II and now the end of the Cold War. On all three occasions, with the collapse of old ideologies and structures, setting up of new countries, new borders, the issue of statelessness and citizenship became a major one. Today, it is a major issue in the countries of the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, but also in South Asia. For instance, those Myanmees or Rohingyas who fled in Bangladesh – fled because they have absolutely no rights as citizens of ...

LESSING: They came from Myanmar, right?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Myanmar, that's right.

DEEN: Formerly Burma.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: That's right, formerly. So the issue of statelessness is, again, a numbers on the rise as they were after the end of the two world wars. And that is a major, major concern, because the legal instruments are not very strong and the institutional arrangements to deal with those problems are not as strong as they are in refugee issues.

LESSING: So how do you deal, in fact, with the child who is born and has no citizenship?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, this is what we are pointing – drawing the attention of – of governments and all this, too, in that book that well, evidently, this is a state responsibility. But we must find ways of avoiding situations where, yes, children end up without a nationality because that is a nexus between state and the citizen and all the rights that flow from that. Without that – that connection – I mean, you are without rights. And it is much of concern and it is nary where frankly, we feel that we probably must do more. We have a certain mandate in that area and not as strong as we have on refugees. But we have problem on and off and right now, it is a mounting problem in many parts of the world.

DEEN: Ah, there are some countries which are embroiled in civil war. They seem to say that some of these insurgent groups who go overseas to raise money for these organizations, will they do it under cover of being refugees? Are these a big problem in some of the European countries? And how do you – if it could be solved?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Yeah, indeed there's a big problem. If governments would use the refugee instruments of the 1951 Convention primarily, they could deal with it because the Refugee Convention clearly states that there are those who are refugees, there are those who are not. There are the so-called exclusion clauses which clearly set out outside the protection shield -- people who are involved in crimes against humanity, war crimes, subversive activities against another state -- and the Convention clearly under the exclusion, covers those that require a very, very careful determination procedure, so that you rule out these evils and these evil persons upon arrival. This is not something you can blame on humanitarian organization. This is almost like shooting the messenger. The instrument is there, it is a matter of using the refugee instrument.

DEEN: What about the new Convention that was adapted by the General Assembly, the Convention for Suppression of Terrorism. Will this also help ...

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Yes. That was indeed an issue that came up in the constitutional discussions where there was feeling that refugees, sort of a terrorist to put it very bluntly, and where we made it clear that let's read the Convention, let's not change the Convention,

because as I say again, if governments would respect and use it, a terrorist, either suspected or confirmed, would, by his or her activities, clearly had excluded him or herself from refugee status. And governments have entirely agreed and made a very strong reference in the preamble to the exclusion clauses of the Refugee Convention.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Jessen-Petersen, you've mentioned health services for refugees. What about educational services? Are these kids growing up without any education?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: A lot of them are, unfortunately. This is where we're back to resource question. That there are clearly not enough resources to provide primary, not to mention, secondary, tertiary education to all the refugees of the world. Other organizations come in here on a very active UNICEF. A lot of the NGO's evidently. But the answer is that we clearly do not provide every refugee in the world with primary education and that is evidently very, very serious and deplorable. We don't have the resources.

LITTLEJOHNS: The agency for Palestinian Refugees seems to manage to provide educational services, why can't you?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, ah, with all due respect, they do have a more limited mandate in that it is focused both in scope and -- and -- and sort of in geography. And their main focus is on social and educational activities. Ours go much, much larger. We're responsible for repatriation operations, we're responsible for that main function, what is called legal protection which requires a lot of resources. So we certainly provide and many, many of the vast majority of our refugee do receive primary. I'm just giving you an honest answer, is they do not all, which we deplore, but it is simply because the resources is not there.

LESSING: We've been talking a lot about refugees, but there are a group of internal refugees in many conflicts – internally displaced people. How many of them are you responsible for?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: I'm glad you asked that question, because I wanted to say that whereas the book, of course, correctly states that we are responsible for some 22 million persons today of which 5 million, approximately, are displaced within their own countries, I should add that there is another – there is another probably around 25 million who are internally displaced and who are beyond the reach of any international organization including UNHCR. The numbers are very, very short of their estimates, because simply we do not know where many of them are and if we do, we have no access to them.

LESSING: And also you have to, in some way, help them to get back to their own homes, if they're allowed to.

JESSEN-PETERSEN: This is, I mean, they are – there is no difference between the sort of state who suffer refugee and an internally displaced. Both groups need protection and

they both need to be helped towards a solution which is our job, when we're involved. And the solution is helping them to go back.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Jessen-Petersen, we have less than a minute left. Where would you say are the main problems related to refugees and which regions of the world have the greatest numbers of refugees?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: That is still Africa. Africa today has the most, the largest number and the most serious problems and that is where a lot of our focus will have to continue over the next couple of years.

LITTLEJOHNS: And which countries in Africa?

JESSEN-PETERSEN: Well, it's the countries around the Great Lakes region of Africa -- Burundi, Rwanda, the Congo, formerly Zaire, part also, Liberian refugees, although there is hope. We now hope that with the settlement in Liberia, up to one million people might be going back over the next twelve months.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Jessen-Petersen, that's all the time we have, thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.**

Our guest has been Soren Jessen-Petersen, Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees. He was interviewed by Thalif Deen of *Inter Press Service* and Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand.*

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**